



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

A Complete Catechesis for Christian Living

Breaking Open the Word
Mary Birmingham

32nd Sunday of Ordinary Time | Year B



Widow's Mite by James Tissot, circa 1886-1894



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening Prayer

Option 1: Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

(Found in your parish Sacramentary.)

Option 2: Use the prayer provided below.

Prayer for Generosity

St. Ignatius of Loyola

Eternal Word,

only begotten Son of God,

Teach me true generosity.

Teach me to serve you as you deserve.

To give without counting the cost,

To fight heedless of wounds,

To labor without seeking rest,

To sacrifice myself without thought of any reward

Save the knowledge that I have done your will.

Amen.

**Catholic
Faith, Life
& Creed**

Version 2.0

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Word worksheets
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Doctrinal Sessions.

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Liturgical Context

The end of the liturgical year is fast approaching. With the end in sight our attention focuses on the culmination of Jesus' ministry.

- ▶ Today Jesus exalts the woman who gave to God out of her need, trusting that God would provide for her.
- ▶ Jesus is in Jerusalem--his final destination on his mission of salvation.
- ▶ His teaching reflects the urgency of his mission.
- ▶ Jesus' disciples still do not understand what he is trying to teach them.
- ▶ Jesus challenged all who would exalt themselves and continue to place burdens on the backs of the poor and oppressed.
- ▶ He teaches all of us that we must give of ourselves just as the woman gave of herself and just as he was about to give the ultimate sacrifice—his life for the sake of the world.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?

First Reading: 1 Kings 17: 10-16

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one or both of the readings; simply make a statement about the reading such as:

- ▶ God provided for the widow who showed hospitality to Elijah.
- ▶ Elijah spoke out against King Ahab and his wife Jezebel.
- ▶ Ahab allowed Jezebel to bring her pagan god Baal with her to her new home Israel. Elijah railed against her and her pagan god.
- ▶ Elijah the prophet warned Ahab that punishment for his actions would result in severe drought.
- ▶ Jezebel set out to kill Elijah and his prophets.
- ▶ Elijah sat down by a stream; God provided food for Elijah.
- ▶ God then told Elijah to go to the widow of Zarephath who lived near the Queen's father and who lived near the pagan shrine to Baal, the god of nature.
- ▶ Baal was believed to have power over the elements of rain, thunder and lightning.
- ▶ The God of Israel would demonstrate his absolute power of all other gods, especially Baal, the one believed to have dominion over the forces of nature, especially rain and the natural elements.
- ▶ Baal, however, was powerless before the God of Israel.
- ▶ Severe drought ensued. God provided for his favored ones just as God provided for Israelites in the desert.
- ▶ Elijah obeyed the Lord and in so doing put himself in harm's way. He went to the dangerous pagan land.
- ▶ God told Elijah to go to the widow and she would help him. Elijah did as God

instructed him to do.

- ▶ Elijah asked the widow for a drink—no stranger was ever denied a drink of water.
- ▶ Elijah asked for more than the customary drink of water, however. Elijah asked for bread. The woman told him that she was on her way to cook her last meal and then she and her son would die.
- ▶ Elijah believed God's word and thus persisted to ask the woman for help. God said she would help him. Elijah believed God; her poverty would not be an obstacle for God.
- ▶ Elijah told the widow that she would not die in the drought—God would provide for her and her son. The woman believed in God's word to her through Elijah.
- ▶ Hers was an act of extraordinary faith. The woman had no reason to believe this stranger in her midst, especially a stranger who was obviously an enemy to the god in which she believed.
- ▶ This vignette is a reminder of the power and efficacy of God's word. God's word will be accomplished.
- ▶ This story exalts the God of Israel over and above the Canaanite gods of nature. God's prophet spoke on behalf of God—he spoke God's own word to the woman. The widow believed in God's word and God's word was accomplished.
- ▶ God promised that her jar of flour and oil would continue to be replenished in spite of the drought.
- ▶ This was a story of hope and consolation for the people in Babylonian captivity.
- ▶ God would restore a remnant of faith-filled people.
- ▶ The woman came to faith in the God of Israel and as a result God provided for her needs.
- ▶ One cannot miss the allusion to the widow in today's Gospel. Two lowly widows are held up as icons of faith.
- ▶ God's word goes out even to the most unexpected places—pagan lands. Will God's wonders never cease?! Salvation will go out to all; it is universal; it is for the entire world.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two, and then surface brief insights in the wider group. If time allows, catechist shares from his or her own life experience.

- ▶ What is the Good News for us today in this reading?
- ▶ In what way are you able to relate this reading to your own life experience?
- ▶ Have you or anyone you know ever believed in God's word despite alarming evidence to the contrary?
- ▶ What does this story have to teach us today in modern society?

- ▶ How is it possible that this poor woman could display such hope and faith in a God she did not even worship in the face of utter destitution? What does she have to teach us today in that regard?

Second Reading: Hebrews 9: 24-28

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one or both of the readings; simply make a statement about the reading such as:

- ▶ The author continues his teaching on the High Priesthood of Jesus who comes at the end of the age to save the world from sin.
- ▶ The Letter to the Hebrews is a commentary par excellence on the priesthood of Jesus.
- ▶ The author meticulously illustrates the way in which Jesus' priesthood differs from the priesthood of the Levites in Israel.
- ▶ The priests of Israel are bound to physical space—they could only offer worship and sacrifice in a temple or sanctuary.
- ▶ Jesus, on the other hand offered the sacrifice of his life—once and for all--transcending both time and space.
- ▶ He offered the ultimate sacrifice—the sacrifice of his life.
- ▶ The Levites offered the blood from animal sacrifice; Jesus spilled his own blood.
- ▶ The author alludes to the ritual of Judaism known as the Day of Atonement.
- ▶ On this day the Levitical priests exited the sanctuary after completion of the sacrifice, and announced that atonement was complete and accomplished a *fete accompli*.
- ▶ Jesus' final priestly mission will be his return in glory at the end of the world.
- ▶ The primary role of priest is to intercede for those he serves.
- ▶ (Baptism initiates us into the priestly, prophetic and royal mission of Christ—we are priest, prophet and king. In that role we too are to offer prayers of intercessions for others.)
- ▶ Jesus, our great High Priest, offers intercessions to God for the entire human race.



Mystagogy reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two and then surface brief insights in the wider group. If time allows, catechist shares from his or her own life experience.

- ▶ What is the Good News in this reading?
- ▶ In what way, if any, can you relate to the teaching in this reading?
- ▶ In what way do you or have you ever exercised a priestly role by praying for others? Why is this a good thing to do? What were the fruits of your prayers?
- ▶ How does the priesthood of Jesus speak to your own relationship with him?
- ▶ In what way is Jesus a Priest for you?

Gospel: Mark 12: 38-44

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

Gospel Exegesis

For those catechists who prefer an abbreviated interpretation of the Gospel refer to the bulleted points that follow and then choose questions for your reflection found at the end of the entire exegesis. (Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.)

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this Gospel mean to you?

Abbreviated treatment of the Gospel:

- ▶ Jesus' relationship with the Temple was well documented in all the Gospels. It was tenuous at best.
- ▶ When he drove out the money changers and merchants from the Temple courtyard it was in response to their abuse of money and corrupt trade practices.
- ▶ Temple sacrifice created a lucrative market for the buying and selling of animals for sacrifice.
- ▶ Merchants took huge advantage of the people as they raised prices and charged exorbitant rates for consumers who were forced to buy their product if they wished to follow the Law's requirement of offering sacrifice in the Temple.
- ▶ Every male Jew would have been expected to spend a significant portion of his earnings in Jerusalem.
- ▶ Pilgrim Jews would have come with purses full of foreign currency.
- ▶ Traders and merchants were ready, eager and willing to make excessive profits from the influx of potential consumers.
- ▶ Jesus was infuriated by the burdens such practices placed on the ordinary worshippers who were simply trying to live righteous lives and do what was expected of them in obedience to God's Law.
- ▶ Jesus was not impressed by the grandeur of the Temple and its courtyards or the elaborate rituals celebrated within them.
- ▶ He cared about the people who were often denied access to their place of worship due to restrictive ritual purity laws or poverty that kept them from purchasing the necessary animal for sacrifice in the first place. Cattle, oxen and other large animals were sold to the rich for sacrifice. Doves were sold to the poor; but even the price of doves was inflated by miserly merchants.
- ▶ The excessive greed of the traders and merchants only added insult to injury and flame to the fires of Jesus' righteous anger and indignation at such abusive practices.
- ▶ The person Jesus noticed midst the crowds, however, was not the rich Jew with his ostentatious oxen sacrifice, he noticed the poor widow of today's Gospel who gave her last penny to God—all that she had and all that she was.
- ▶ The widow is symbol of direct opposition to the false piety of the scribes.

- ▶ She exemplifies true Jewish holiness while they demonstrate arrogant misuse of power, authority and a pretentious show of piety.
- ▶ She represents every person—especially the poor peasants of Jesus’ day.
- ▶ The woman placed her coin—the smallest denomination in circulation—a half penny--into the gold trumpet shaped containers in the Temple treasury.
- ▶ She gave two such coins. This was the “a-ha” moment of the story. She would not have been expected to give both coins—one was enough. She would have been expected to keep the other one to support herself.
- ▶ We know this is a significant event as Mark used a common literary device to tell us so. He tells his readers that Jesus gathered his disciples to listen to him—he was about to teach them a powerful lesson.
- ▶ Jesus’ words were words of lament. Jesus lamented over her abject poverty. The wealthy gave out of their abundance and she gave out of her need. She gave everything she had—her entire subsistence, security and livelihood--to God. There could be no greater trust in God’s mercy and providence.
- ▶ Jesus’ teaching came full circle.
- ▶ This woman who gave her all in all sets the stage for the one who shortly would give his all in all for the salvation of the world—not just his subsistence, security and livelihood—but his entire life!
- ▶ Jesus presented his catechism on true discipleship in the new kingdom of God.

This brings the abbreviated interpretation to a close. Refer to the questions at the end of the entire exegesis and choose the appropriate questions for your reflection.

Further elaboration of the Gospel:

The following exegesis is provided for your further and continued reflection.

- ▶ In addition to the above material there are several other interesting elements in this Gospel for our reflection.
- ▶ Jesus’ break with the scribes and Pharisees is complete. Mark insists that his break is with Judaism, not with the people.
- ▶ Debate is over; Jesus now teaches the crowds. Nothing more is to be gained by antagonistic repartee with the Jewish officials.
- ▶ Just who is the cast of characters in today’s Gospel?

The scribes.

- ▶ Scribes were men learned in the Law of Moses. They enjoyed special status. The Talmud insisted that when two parties gathered, the scribe should be the first person greeted.
- ▶ Scribes knew the Law better than anyone and as a result many of them (if not most) basked in self-righteous honor that was bestowed upon them.
- ▶ Special seats were assigned to them in the synagogue; they wore special robes and garments to set them apart from everyone else.
- ▶ Very often they were dripping in an ostentatious show of false piety. They prayed openly and loudly so all could hear and be impressed.
- ▶ They had a history of treating the poor and marginalized badly.

- ▶ Scripture and Judaism itself railed against such exploitative, avaricious pastoral leaders.

Widows.

- ▶ Women did not enjoy an equal status with men.
- ▶ They were on a par with slaves and children.
- ▶ Women were dependent on their fathers or their husbands for survival.
- ▶ The most vulnerable person in first century society was a widow with no husband or father or relative to care for her.
- ▶ Scripture upholds the rights of widows and takes very seriously the mandate to care for them. Widows' rights were of paramount importance.
- ▶ Scripture's definition of an unrighteous person was someone who refused to care for widows and orphans. (Ps146:6) Orphans were just as vulnerable as widows.
- ▶ A widow who did not give birth to a male child was afforded the right to marry her brother-in-law. Children that resulted from that union were given the name of the first husband. If the brother-in-law refused to comply, it was cause for dishonor and shame. (Levirate Law--Deut. 25:5-10, Mark 12:18-27.)
- ▶ God's compassionate, providential care was especially reserved for widows. Woe to anyone who refused to help widows and orphans.
- ▶ Jesus extends God's compassionate love to the widow in today's Gospel.
- ▶ Jesus declares the elite class—scribes and Pharisees as ineligible for true discipleship.
- ▶ Their behavior does not reflect Jesus' insistence that the last will be first and the first will be the servant of all.
- ▶ Scribes exploited widows and in the process became wealthy as a result.
- ▶ Women were not trusted to manage their deceased husband's estate. Scribes were appointed trustee of the widow's estate. Logic would assume that pious scribes would certainly be honest enough to protect the rights of the widow and orphan. Nothing could be further from reality. Trustees were given a fee for managing the estate.
- ▶ The entire system was rife with corruption. Trustees frequently embezzled money from the estate. Even though Scripture insisted that widows and orphans receive what was due to them, which seldom happened in real life.
- ▶ Scribes often became rich off of their ill-gotten gains.
- ▶ Mark insists that God will severely judge and punish such opportunistic behavior.

Another interpretation has been suggested for this text.

- ▶ First century culture was an honor and shame based society.
- ▶ In such a culture no one would intentionally jeopardize or diminish one's status.
- ▶ When the woman donated everything she owned it would have been considered a shameful thing to do.
- ▶ She purposefully weakened her status in society and increased her poverty.
- ▶ When the woman gave all she owned to the Temple she increased her marginalized status as well as her poverty.
- ▶ Jesus did not praise her behavior; he lamented it.

- ▶ The priests taught her to give to the Temple treasury.
- ▶ She did what she was taught to do.
- ▶ In return the priests had a responsibility to use the Temple donations to help the poor.
- ▶ Rather than help the poor, such donations increased the coffers of greedy religious leaders.
- ▶ Such money was spent on flamboyant trappings of religious power—flowing robes and lavish banquets.
- ▶ Such is the way in which the scribes ‘devoured the estates of widows. (v. 39)”



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to ONE or MORE appropriate questions (as time allows) in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface their insights in the wider group. Catechist responds by sharing his or her own experience. See appendix for an example. (@ Ten-twelve minutes)

- ▶ What is the Good News in the Gospel?
- ▶ What is the lesson in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does the woman in today’s Gospel teach us about our relationship with God?
- ▶ In what way, if any, have you ever given so much of yourself that it hurt?
- ▶ Who are the people today that have limited access to the goods of this world and who are made to feel unwelcome and cut off from God’s merciful grace in our churches?
- ▶ Who today gets rich off of the backs of the poor? In what way does this continue in modern society?
- ▶ Why is such behavior often excused by many people? Why does the Biblical mandate to care for orphans and widows often fall on deaf ears?
- ▶ What does the behavior of the scribes teach us? In what way have you ever behaved like a scribe?
- ▶ What does the behavior of the widow teach us? In what way have you ever behaved like the widow in today’s Gospel?
- ▶ What does Jesus’ frustration with the Temple and all its trappings have to teach us today?
- ▶ Why did Jesus’ teaching and his response to people like the poor widow lead to his death? In what way does this still take place today? What is the lesson for us?

Catechist invites participants to reflect on the following question in the group or in their journal.

- ▶ After reflection on today’s liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God’s call?

CONCLUDING PRAYER

*THE PRAYER,
O LORD MY GOD
(By Saint Anselm.)*

O Lord my God.
Teach my heart this day
where and how to find you.

You have made me and re-made me,
and you have bestowed on me
all the good things I possess,
and still I do not know you.
I have not yet done
that for which I was made.

Teach me to seek you,
for I cannot seek you
unless you teach me,
or find you
unless you show yourself to me.

Let me seek you in my desire;
let me desire you in my seeking.
Let me find you by loving you;
let me love you when I find you.

OR
Minor rite: Blessing: 95-97.

APPENDIX

- Who today gets rich off of the backs of the poor? In what way does this continue in modern society?
- Why is such behavior often excused by many people? Why does the Biblical mandate to care for orphans and widows often fall on deaf ears?
- What does the behavior of the scribes teach us? In what way have you ever behaved like a scribe?
- What does the behavior of the widow teach us? In what way have you ever behaved like the widow in today's Gospel?

Portions of my reflection from Word and Worship Workbook, Year B, Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, (Paulist Press, 2000, 717).

"Today's gospel reminds me of the ways in which the poor are exploited in the world and in the church. We often embrace an attitude which insists that if the poor would just work harder, they would not be in such dire straits. While there is no doubt some truth to any statement, it is false to assume that the poor are poor because they refuse to work. The system keeps them poor. Years ago our family was working with the poor in an urban parish. We were driving from a suburb to an inner city parish. We decided that we should discern about moving into a poor inner-city neighborhood in the parish. Our investigation began in earnest. Our good intentions were thwarted at every turn. We looked at many rat-infested dilapidated houses in the inner city. In the end we decided against the move. We could not afford to move. We were paying far less rent for a nice house in the suburbs than what we would have to pay in the inner city neighborhood. We could not afford to move into the city, nor would it have been good stewardship of the resources we were given. The reason the rent was so high was because it was offered on a weekly basis--an attractive option for the poor who are often paid by the week. The very people who need a break are exploited at every turn of the road.

Parishes are also guilty of exploitation. Some parishes publish the giving history of their parishioners in hopes of shaming people into better stewardship. As we know from today's gospel the dollar a week of Mrs. So and So may represent the greatest sacrifice in the entire parish. One parish took people off the parish roster if after one year they failed to donate anything to the parish. They were no longer considered members of that community. No questions were asked, they were simply expunged. That same parish donates nothing to the world's poor.

Our parish is very generous to the poor. I am honored to be in a parish that tithes, and that supports multiple projects for the poor in this country and in the Third World. Do we always exercise an option for the poor, however? Probably not. Our first question is not, "How does this decision impact the poor in our parish, community and world?" We have a long way to go before we get to that point in our justice consciousness. I am confident that we are on the way, however."

That excerpt was written twelve years ago. I could write the same thing today as it is as true now as it was then. I am in a new parish and it is even more conscious of its responsibility to the world's poor. Our parish gives a half million dollars a year to the world's poor. Hospitals and schools have been built in Third World countries. I am awed by the generosity of the people.

Yet still we hear echoes at times of the undeserving poor who scam the system, refuse to work and are blight on society.

I once worked with a gentleman whose life's work was with the poor. He told me something I will never forget. He said, "When we meet a cantankerous wealthy person we forgive it by saying that person is simply eccentric. If we encounter a cantankerous poor person they are ungrateful, undeserving, scoundrels. People are sinners whether rich or poor. Sometimes the condition of poverty itself so ruptures human dignity that there is little pleasantries left to offer others. Jesus had tremendous compassion on the absolute poverty stricken people in his midst. To water that down into categories of the deserving and undeserving poor is contrary to the Gospel. Yes he challenged personal responsibility but he always loved them into that responsibility.



Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

1 Kings 17: 10-16 | Hebrews 9: 24-28 | Mark 12: 38-44

Jesus Christ
Incarnation
Catholic Social Teaching
Eschatology, Heaven, Hell and
Purgatory.

Life Issues
Saints
Liturgical Year
Eucharist Series

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

JESUS CHRIST

Jesus is in Jerusalem and his mission is coming to fulfillment. Jesus is the new eschatological Son of David, the Son of God who is fast approaching the reason for his Incarnation—his saving life, death and resurrection. It is thus appropriate that we focus our attention on JESUS CHRIST.

INCARNATION

Jesus is in Jerusalem and his mission is coming to fulfillment. Jesus is the new eschatological Son of David, the Son of God who is fast approaching the reason for his Incarnation—his saving life, death and resurrection. It is thus appropriate that we focus on the ultimate gift of God—the INCARNATION of his Son.

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

Jesus heralds the widow in today's Gospel who represents the common person—the peasant community that was considered less than by the elite class. Jesus always stretched those boundaries and invited people to see the equality of all people. It is thus fitting that we focus our doctrinal session on what the Church teaches about CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING.

LIFE ISSUES

Jesus heralds the widow in today's Gospel who represents the common person—the peasant community that was considered less than by the elite class. Jesus always stretched those boundaries and invited people to see the equality of all people. Jesus upheld the dignity of each person—he upheld every person's right to life to the fullest. It is thus fitting that we focus our doctrinal session on what the Church teaches about LIFE ISSUES.

ESCHATOLOGY: END TIMES, HEAVEN, HELL AND PURGATORY.

These last days of the liturgical year focus on last things, end times and Jesus' return. The Gospel requires more than words; it requires faithful action. Those who live righteous lives can expect to be true citizens in the kingdom of God—here and now and in the hereafter. It is thus appropriate that today we focus our attention on **ESCHATOLOGY: END TIMES, HEAVEN, HELL, AND PURGATORY.**

SAINTS

In these last days of the liturgical cycle we focus on the communion of saints—the saints on earth and the saints in heaven that share the eschatological banquet in the Eucharist. We recently celebrated the feast of All Saints and All Souls. It is thus a proper time for us to focus our attention today on what the Church teaches about the **SAINTS.**

LITURGICAL YEAR

Any Sunday of the year is an appropriate time to reflect on the cycle of the Church year. Every Sunday is a most appropriate time to address what we celebrate in the unfolding liturgical cycle. The entire mystery of Christ from his incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension to the Father and the sending of the Holy Spirit is manifested in one complete liturgical year. As the present Church year is winding down and a new year is soon to begin, it is appropriate that we address what the Church teaches about the **LITURGICAL YEAR.**

EUCCHARIST SERIES:

Our premier celebration of the Paschal Mystery—the life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension sending of the Spirit is made manifest and re-presented for us in the Eucharistic liturgy. Thus any Sunday would be an appropriate time to focus our attention on the Eucharistic liturgy. This week we continue the series on the Mass. Today we will focus on part ____ of the Eucharistic Series.